

# Commander-in-Chief

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The president is Commander-in-Chief of our nation's military services. This role goes all the way back to the Constitution. It referred to the president as "Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States." Today, the president also commands the Air Force.

Two presidents, Washington and Madison, commanded troops in the field. Modern day presidents, however, leave that to the field commanders.

In the president's role as Commander-in-Chief, we see the system of checks and balances at work. Even though the president is leader of the military services, it is Congress that has the power to declare war. Also, the president is never a member of the armed services. He is its civilian leader. President Eisenhower, an army general, resigned from the army when he became president.

The role of Commander-in-Chief places awesome power and responsibility in the hands of each president.

The president is at the top of the military chain of command. Next in line under the president is the Secretary of Defense. Next is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Next after the Chiefs of Staff are the field commanders.

The president has a group of advisors to help him make military decisions. These people are the members of the National Security Council. They may include the vice-president, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State. They may also include the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of the CIA, the Secretary of the Treasury, and other advisors.

The president is authorized to command U.S. troops by assigning them duties anywhere in the world. For example, President Johnson chose targets for the military to bomb in the Vietnam War. The President is also responsible for supervising martial law in war zones and for establishing military courts. He is responsible for setting up military rule in conquered territories. The president may also declare a cease-fire. Another one of his duties is to conduct peace negotiations at the end of a war.

The president's powers as Commander-in-Chief are limited during times of peace. They are expanded during wartime. For example, during peacetime a president can only dismiss a military officer after a court martial. During a war, he can dismiss an officer at any time.

In World War I, President Wilson made the decision to ask Congress to declare war on the Central Powers. In his speech he said, "The world must be made safe for democracy."

In World War II, President Truman made the decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

In more recent times, presidents have not asked Congress for declarations of war. Instead, they have used the military without declaring war by taking "police actions" against enemy countries. The Korean War was the first of these undeclared wars.

In his War on Terrorism, President Bush expanded the president's powers. He took several controversial actions. One was the electronic surveillance program to monitor the communications of possible terrorists. Another was the use of certain interrogation techniques on detainees at Guantanamo Bay and in Iraq.

The president often makes these world-changing decisions from the White House, but sometimes he works from



Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

Camp David. Camp David is an isolated retreat for the president. President Carter met with the leaders of Israel and Egypt there to work out the peace agreement known as the Camp David Accords.

Camp David is located in the mountains of Maryland. It is said to be one of the most secure locations in the world. It is maintained by the Navy and guarded by the Marines. In addition to being a safe place, it is also a quiet place. At Camp David, the president can think and talk to advisors away from the stresses of the White House.

Whether he is making decisions from peaceful Camp David or from the busy White House, the president is exercising one of his greatest responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. \_\_\_\_\_ is the Commander-in-Chief of the United States military services.
- A. The Secretary of Defense
  - B. Congress
  - C. The president
  - D. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. In their role as Commander-in-Chief, most presidents lead troops in the field.
- A. false
  - B. true
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The president is Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the Navy but not the Air Force.
- A. true
  - B. false
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Second in command under the president is/are the \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Secretary of Defense
  - B. Navy generals
  - C. Joint Chiefs of Staff
  - D. Army generals
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The president is the only one who can declare war.
- A. true
  - B. false
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Camp David is an isolated retreat for the president of the United States.
- A. false
  - B. true
7. Why have recent wars not been declared by Congress?

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Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

8. What actions did President Bush take that expanded the president's war powers?

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**Write a paragraph about some of the things that a president does in his role as Commander-in-Chief of the military services.**

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**Do you think that the president's powers as Commander-in-Chief should be expanded even more? Or do you think that other groups, such as Congress, should have more of a say in military matters? Explain your answer.**

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